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The MESA NORTEÑA

the use of san pedro cactus and healing altars in the shamanic tradition of Northern Peru

HOWARD G. CHARING
& PETER CLOUDSLEY
talk with Maestro JUAN NAVARRO

Shamans from different cultures and traditions have been using psychoactive plants since the dawn of human emergence.

These plants have been used traditionally for guidance divination, healing, maintaining a balance with the spirit or consciousness of the living world.



The hallucinogenic san pedro cactus has been used since ancient times, and in Peru the tradition has been unbroken for over 3,000 years. The earliest depiction of the cactus is a carving showing a mythological being holding a san pedro, and dates from about 1300 BC. It comes from the Chavín culture (c.1400-400 BCE) and was found in a temple at Chavín de Huantar, in the northern highlands of Peru. Later, the Mochica culture (c.500 CE) used the cactus in their iconography.

Even in present day mythology, it is told that God hid the keys to heaven in a secret place and san pedro used the magical powers of a cactus to discover this place; later the cactus was named after him.

LA MESA NORTEÑA

Juan Navarro was born in the highland village of Somate, department of Piura. He is a descendant of a long lineage of healers and shamans working with the magical powers of the sacred lakes known as Las Huaringas which stand at 4,000 metres and have been revered since earliest Peruvian civilization. At the age of eight Juan made his first pilgrimage to Las Huaringas, and took san pedro for the first time. Every month or two it is necessary to return here to accumulate energy and protection to heal his people. As well as locals and Limeños (people from Lima), pilgrims also come from many parts of South America.

During the sessions Juan works untiringly, assisted by his two sons - as is common in this tradition - in an intricate sequence of processes, including invocation, diagnosis, divination, and healing with natural objects, or artes. The artes are initially placed on the maestro's altar or mesa, and picked up when required during the ceremony.

These artes are an astonishing and beautiful array of shells, swords, magnets, quartzes, objects resembling sexual organs, rocks which spark when struck together, and stones from animals' stomachs which they have swallowed to aid digestion!

The artes are collected from pre-Colombian tombs, and sacred energetic places, particularly Las Huaringas. They bring magical qualities to the ceremony where, under the visionary influence of san pedro, their invisible powers may be experienced.

The maestro's mesa - a weaving placed on the ground on which all the artes are placed, (mesa also means 'table' in Spanish) - is a representation of the forces of nature and the cosmos. Through the mesa the shaman is able to work with and influence these forces to diagnose and heal disease.

The traditional mesa norteña has three areas: on the left is the campo ganadero or 'field of the dark'; on the right is the campo justiciero or the 'field of the light' (justiciero means justice); and in the centre is the campo medio or 'neutral field', which is the place of balance between the forces of light and dark. It is important for us not to look at these forces as positive or negative - it is what we human beings do with these forces which is important.

Although the contents and form of the artes vary from tradition to tradition, the mesa rituals serve to remind us that the use and power of symbols extends throughout all cultures.

SAN PEDRO

San pedro (*trichocereus pachanoi*) grows on the dry eastern slopes of the Andes, between 2,000 - 3,000 metres above sea level, and commonly reaches six metres or more in height. It is also grown by local shamans in their herb gardens.

As can be imagined, early European missionaries held the native practices in considerable contempt, and indeed were very negative when reporting the use of the san pedro. Yet a Spanish missionary, cited by Christian Rätsch, grudgingly admitted the cactus' medicinal value in the midst of a tirade reviling it:

"It is a plant with whose aid the devil is able to strengthen the Indians in their idolatry; those who drink its juice lose their senses and are as if dead; they

are almost carried away by the drink and dream a thousand unusual things and believe that they are true. The juice is good against burning of the kidneys and, in small amounts, is also good against high fever, hepatitis, and burning in the bladder."

A shaman's account of the cactus is in radical contrast:

"It first ... produces ... drowsiness or a dreamy state and a feeling of lethargy ... a slight dizziness ... then a great 'vision', a clearing of all the faculties ... it produces a light numbness in the body and afterwards a tranquillity. And then comes detachment, a type of visual force ... inclusive of all the senses ... including the sixth sense, the telepathic sense of transmitting oneself across time and matter ... like a kind of removal of one's thought to a distant dimension."

San pedro, considered the 'maestro of the maestros', enables the

shaman to make a bridge between the visible and the invisible world for his people. The Quechua name for it is punku, which means 'doorway'. The doorway connects the patient's body to his spirit; to heal the body we must heal the spirit. San pedro can show us the psychic causes of illness intuitively or in mythical dream language.

The effects of san pedro work through various stages, beginning with an expanded physical awareness in the body. Soon this is followed by euphoric feelings and then, after several hours, psychic and visionary effects become more noticeable.

San pedro balances the nervous system so people lose their fears, frights and traumas, and it charges people with positive energy



Talking with Juan Navarro

What is the relationship of the maestro with san pedro?

In the north of Peru the power of san pedro works in combination with tobacco. Also the sacred lakes Las Huarinas are very important. This is where we go to find the most powerful healing herbs which we use to energize our people. We use dominio [linking one's intent with the spirit power of the plants] to give strength and protection from supernatural forces such as sorcery and negative thoughts.

It is also put into the seguros - amulet bottles filled with perfume, plants and seeds gathered from Las Huarinas. You keep them in your home for protection and to make your life go well.

These plants do not have any secondary effects on the nervous system, nor do they provoke hallucinations. San pedro has strength and is mildly hallucinatory, but you cannot become addicted. It doesn't do any harm to your body, rather it helps the maestro to see what the problem is with his patient. Of course some people have this gift born in them - as our ancestors used to say, it is in the blood of a shaman.

Is san pedro a 'teacher plant'?

Of course, but it has a certain mystery. You have to be compatible with it because it doesn't work for everybody. The shaman has a special ➤





Ancient Peruvian textile depicting a figure surrounded by san pedro cactus

relationship with it. It circulates in the body of the patient and where it finds abnormality it enables the shaman to detect it. It lets him know the pain they feel and whereabouts it is.

So it is the link between patient and maestro. It also purifies the blood of the person who drinks it. It balances the nervous system so people lose their fears, frights and traumas, and it charges people with positive energy.

Everyone must drink so that the maestro can connect with them. Only the dose may vary from person to person because not everyone is as strong.

What about the 'singado'? [inhalation of tobacco juice through the nostrils]

The tobacco leaf is left for two to three months in contact with honey, and when required for the singado it is macerated with aguardiente, or alcohol. How it functions depends on which nostril is used; when taken in by the left side it is for liberating us of negative energy, including psychosomatic ills, pains in the body, bad influences of other people - or 'envy' as we call it here. As you take it in you must

concentrate on the situation which is going badly, or the person which is giving out a negative energy.

When taken through the right nostril it is for rehabilitating and energizing, so that your projects go well. It's not for getting high on. Afterwards you can spit the tobacco out or swallow it, it doesn't matter. It has an interrelation with the san pedro in the body, and intensifies the visionary effects.

Tobacco is an important plant in the ceremonies - can you smoke in the session?

No, no, no. It may be the same plant but here another element comes into play, which is fire. As the session is carried out in darkness, the fire in the darkness can perturb, create a negative reflection or vision. It can cause trauma.

You use a chungana [rattle] during the san pedro sessions and I 'see' the sound as a beam of a light penetrating the darkness.

Yes, sound and light are interrelated. Chunganas are used to invoke the spirits of the dead, whether of family or of great healers, so that they may feel

comfortable with us. The chunganas are to give us 'enchantment' (protection and positive energy) and they have a relaxing effect when taking san pedro.

What is the power of the artes - the objects on the mesa?

They come from Las Huaringas, where a special energy is bestowed on everything, including the healing herbs which grow there and nowhere else. If you bathe in the lakes it takes away all your ills. You bathe with the intention of leaving everything negative behind. People go there to leave their enemies behind, so they can't do them any harm.

After bathing, the maestro cleanses you with these artes, swords, bars, chontas (bamboo staffs), saints, and even huacos (the powers from ancient sacred sites). They 'flourish' you - spraying you with agua florida (perfume) and herb macerations, and giving you sweet things like limes and honey, so your life flourishes.

We maestros also need to go to Las Huaringas regularly because we make enemies from healing people, so we need to protect ourselves.

The reason for this is that two forces exist: the good and the bad. The bad forces are from the pacts which the brujos (sorcerors with negative intentions) make with the devil. The brujo is the rival of the curandero or healer. So when the curandero heals, he makes an enemy of the brujo. It's not so much because he sends the bad magic back, as because he does the opposite thing to him, and they want supremacy in the battle.

Not far from Las Huaringas is a place called Sondor, which has its own lakes. This is where evil magic is practiced and where they do harm in a variety of ways. I know because as a curandero I must know how sorcery is practiced, in order to defend myself and my patients.

Do people go there secretly?

Of course no one admits to going there, but they pass through Huancabamba just like the others who are going to Las Huaringas. I know various people who practice bad magic at a distance. They do it using physical means, concentrating, summoning up a person's soul, knowing their characteristics etc. and can make them suffer an accident, or make

an organ ill or whatever, or make their work go badly wrong. They have the power to get to their spirit.

And people can even do harm to themselves. For example, if a person has bad intentions towards another and that person is well protected with an encanto, (amulet) then he will do himself harm.

How does the 'rastreo' [diagnosis through psychic means] work? Are you in an altered state?

No, I'm completely normal and lucid. What allows the reading of a person's past, present or future, is the strength of the san pedro and tobacco. It is an innate capability - not everybody has the gift, you can't learn it from someone, it is inherited. The perceptions come

through any one of the senses - sound, vision, smell, or a feeling inside of what the person is feeling, a weakness, a pain or whatever. Sometimes, for instance, a bad taste in the mouth may indicate a bad liver.

All the things on the mesa are perfectly normal, natural things: chontas, swords, stones etc. They have just received a treatment - like a radio tuned to a certain frequency - so they can heal particular things, weaknesses or whatever. But always it is necessary to concentrate on the sacred lakes, Las Huaringas.

Is it necessary for the maestro to take san pedro to have vision?

Of course, he must take san pedro

and tobacco. But it is to protect himself from the person's negativity and illness, not because he needs it to have the vision.

JUAN NAVARRO is a descendant of a long lineage of healers and shamans working with the magical powers of Las Huaringas.

PETER CLOUDSLEY has built up an extensive archive of traditional Peruvian music and interviews. He teaches courses on music and popular culture in Latin America and speaks fluent Spanish and Portuguese.

HOWARD G. CHARING is a co-director of Eagle's Wing Centre for Contemporary Shamanism. He has studied plant spirit medicine with shamans and healers of the Andes, Amazon Rainforest, and the Philippines. He has been initiated in the lineage of the Maestros of the Rio Napo community in the Upper Amazon and has been baptised into the Shipibo tribe. Howard organises journeys to meet and work with these maestros.

Details are on www.shamanism.co.uk or telephone (01273) 882 027

Photo of San Pedro Growing in pots
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we must acknowledge that we, as humans, have realised from earliest times that knowledge goes beyond sensory awareness or the rational way of understanding the world

San pedro can take us directly to a telepathic communion and show us that there is no such thing as an inanimate object

Everything in the universe is alive and has a spirit. This is the gift of the plants which offer us a doorway into the infinite

People gather for a san pedro Ceremony. On the floor the maestro has set up his mesa

